

**THE MEANING OF LEFT-RIGHT IN LATIN AMERICA:  
A COMPARATIVE VIEW**

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## **ABSTRACT**

During recent years the so-called left turn across the Latin American continent has stimulated research seeking to explain this resurgence, accompanied by a lively debate about distinct variants of the left, broadly conceived as “good” and “bad,” social democratic and populist. This paper goes beyond this simplistic distinction: It explores the substantive policy content of left and right in Latin American countries using original expert survey data of policy positions of political parties and presidents in 18 countries and furthermore compares these left-right estimates with results from elite surveys. The examples discussed underscore the need to take policy positions on particular policy dimensions into account and show that caution is recommended in the use of the general left-right axis.

## **RESUMEN**

En los últimos años, el llamado giro a la izquierda a lo largo del continente latinoamericano estimuló investigaciones que trataron de explicar este resurgimiento, acompañadas de un debate vivaz sobre las distintas variantes de la izquierda, concebidas en general como buena y mala, social demócrata y populista. Este artículo va más allá de esta distinción simplista. Explora la cuestión del contenido de políticas sustantivo de la derecha y la izquierda en los países latinoamericanos usando datos de encuesta originales sobre las posiciones de política de los partidos y los presidentes en 18 países y, además, compara estas estimaciones de posiciones de derecha y de izquierda con los resultados de encuestas a elites. Los ejemplos discutidos subrayan la necesidad de tomar en cuenta las posiciones respecto de dimensiones de política particulares y muestran que es recomendable ser cautos en el uso del eje general izquierda-derecha.



“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”  
—Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass*

During recent years left-wing parties and leaders gained access to governments in a series of elections in Latin American countries. By and large these victories were observed with a certain amount of suspicion, chiefly on account of the advanced anti-neoliberal stances of the elected leaders and their cherishing of links with Cuba. The scholarly community, somewhat puzzled by the events, quickly engaged in a lively debate, or rather in two lively debates, on the phenomenon also dubbed the “left-turn”: classifying the left in Latin America and explaining the resurgence of parties and leaders on the left.

On the one hand, elected leftist candidates were very soon perceived to be far from a homogeneous group across the region, and many authors started to engage in discussions about classifications within the Latin American left. Most prominently discussed is the juxtaposition of “good” left vs. “bad” left:—of radicals vs. moderates and populists vs. social democrats, who tend to be categorized into those who embrace neoliberal market policies and those who fiercely oppose them (Castañeda 2004, 2006; but also Panizza 2005; Schamis 2006). While some have recently suggested further ramifications into three (Walker 2008) and even four distinct lefts (Levitsky and Roberts forthcoming), other authors emphasize common grounds among left-wing parties, movements, and leaders, such as the promotion of social inclusion.

The focus on programmatic similarities, on the other hand, is the starting point for scholars who wish to explain what motivated the left turn across the region in the first place. In this line of reasoning the shift to the left is viewed as a consequence of failures of the neoliberal/liberal-democratic paradigm (Cameron 2009; Luna and Filgueira 2009). Voters turned to the left out of their growing frustration and disappointment with representative democracy (Mainwaring 2006; Roberts 2007), to

punish neoliberal incumbents for their poor economic performance (Arnold and Samuels forthcoming; Panizza 2005), or as a general reaction to the perils of globalization, granting the left a “moderate mandate” (Baker and Greene 2009) to “re-equilibrate” economies in order to cushion negative effects for those hurt by market-oriented reforms (Stokes 2009; see also Debs and Helmke 2008 on inequality).

This paper aims at contributing to both lines of research by exploring the substantive meaning of left and right in Latin America with the help of expert surveys of policy positions of political parties and presidents in 18 Latin American countries. Results from recent elite survey data have shown that political elites in Latin America have a clear and coherent understanding of the ideological meaning of left and right (Alcántara 2004; Zoco 2006). Furthermore, Colomer (2005) demonstrates that most Latin American electorates are consistently located on the general left-right dimension, and Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009) identify a primary axis of political competition of left-right. However, as reflected in the ongoing debates, it is much more difficult to pin down the precise policy content of this axis.

Left and right are labels and their specific content may differ. Huber and Inglehart (1995) show that in the 42 countries where they administered their open-ended expert survey to measure left and right, political conflict indeed tends to be structured along this single dimension. However, they conclude that the left-right dimension “is an amorphous vessel whose meaning varies in systematic ways with the underlying political and economic conditions in a given society” (Huber and Inglehart 1995, 90). It is precisely this variation that is neglected by the attempt to classify the left in Latin America, and my results show that the meaning of this general axis is highly context—i.e., country—dependent. This raises concerns for both the ongoing discussion of classifications of the left and cross-national comparisons based on this scale.

The paper proceeds as follows: After briefly describing the expert survey, the paper compares presidential positioning on the general left-right dimension, showing considerable dispersion within the left. These differences are examined further in the subsequent section with the help of a two-dimensional representation of the overall left-right in socioeconomic terms, a descriptive comparison that already hints at fundamental differences among countries. Building on findings by Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009),

the paper then moves on to explore the substantive policy content of left and right in the expert survey results in each country. Finally, in order to validate my measures, I directly compare the estimates from the expert survey with those derived by the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) project from elite surveys, showing substantial agreement. The last section summarizes the exploratory analysis.

### **A NEW EXPERT SURVEY OF POLICY POSITIONS**

The estimates used in this paper come from an expert survey of policy positions of political parties *and* presidents in 18 Latin American countries conducted by Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009) in late 2006 and early 2007.<sup>1</sup> This survey, where the typical expert was an academic specializing in the political parties and electoral politics of the country in question, yielded estimates for 146 political parties and 18 presidents on up to 11 primary policy dimensions per country.<sup>2</sup> Political parties were identified following the general criteria applied in Benoit and Laver (2006) and Laver and Hunt (1992).<sup>3</sup> The survey included every existing party that won seats in the lower chamber in the country's most recent election, parties that won at least 1 percent of the vote, and additional parties that despite not meeting the above criteria were judged to be politically important by local experts. Very straightforwardly, presidents were simply those in office at the time the survey was deployed.

Substantive policy dimensions covered can be identified as three sets to be applied on a country-by-country basis. Following Benoit and Laver (2006), a hard core of four policy dimensions was included in the questionnaire and deployed in every country:

- Economic policy (interpreted as the trade-off between lower taxes and higher public spending)
- Social policy (interpreted as policies on matters such as abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and euthanasia)
- The decentralization of decision-making
- Environmental policy (interpreted as the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth)<sup>4</sup>

A further set that can be understood as core dimensions for Latin America was identified and also deployed in every country. These are issues in general considered to be of key interest for politics and political competition in Latin American and relate to:

- Religious principles in politics
- Globalization
- Regional Economic Cooperation
- Deregulation or Privatization<sup>5</sup>

The last group of policy dimensions comprised issues that applied to subsets of countries or only to individual country contexts. This included questions about the promotion of minority rights and rights of indigenous people, security and individual liberties, party regulation or the use of family remittances. For each substantive policy dimension experts were presented with two different types of 20-point scales. The first one related to the *position* a political actor is judged to take on the policy dimension in question, with the lower endpoint, 1, generally corresponding to “left” positioning and the higher, 20, to “right.” The second scale, in turn, related to the *importance* an actor attaches to a policy dimension and also ran from 1 (not important at all) to 20 (very important).

In addition to these specific policy dimensions and particularly interesting for the aim of this paper, the survey also included a direct measure of positions on a general left-right scale, on which experts were asked to locate political actors “taking all aspects of party policy into account.” As we will see in the following, this makes it possible for us to directly compare left-right positioning of presidents throughout the region. Moreover, as the interpretation of the generic notion of left and right was left to the country specialists, these directly measured positions allow us to further explore the meaning of this widely employed scale in specific national contexts.

## **POLICY POSITIONING IN LATIN AMERICA**

Many observers of Latin American politics have commented on the “rise of the left” during recent years, especially in regard to presidential elections and the number of left



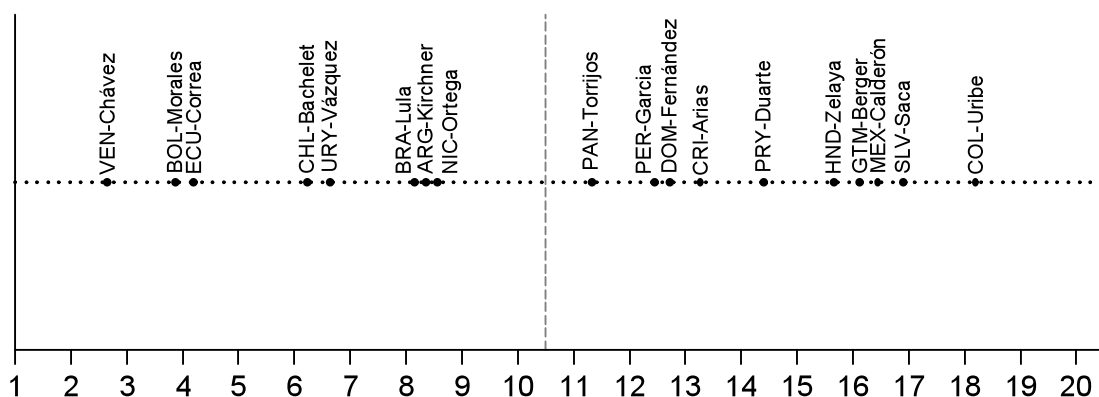
leaders elected into government. It seems appropriate then to explore policy positioning in this region, starting with a look at how country experts judged the presidents in office to be positioned on this general scale at the time the survey was deployed. Before we turn our attention to the substantive meaning of left and right, however, it is instructive to contrast this one-dimensional dichotomy with a two-dimensional interpretation of this scale in socioeconomic terms.

### Presidents on the General Left-Right Dimension

Figure 1 shows presidential positioning on the general left-right dimension running from 1 (left) to 20 (right) with a dashed line indicating its midpoint at 10.5. When comparing positions country experts ascribed to presidents in the 18 Latin American countries under consideration, by and large we are not confronted with big surprises. Presidents span almost the entire range of this unidimensional representation. With a mean score of 2.65, the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is clearly the most “leftist” leader in the region, while Alvaro Uribe from Colombia is judged to occupy the most conservative position with a mean score of 18.2.

**FIGURE 1**

#### **PRESIDENTIAL POSITIONING IN LATIN AMERICA ON THE GENERAL LEFT-RIGHT DIMENSION**



Nevertheless, one of the first points that stands out is the overall distribution along the left-right continuum. Despite the “red tide” that swept through Latin America, talk about “the continent of the left” back in 2006 clearly seems to have been overstated. Of the 18 presidents in office at the time the survey was deployed only 8 are positioned to the left of the scale’s midpoint, whereas we find 10 presidents to the right, which leaves us with a regional mean of 10.90.<sup>6</sup>

When we focus on the 8 left-wing presidents, it also becomes evident that between leaders usually lumped together in the same group of radicals or moderates we actually find considerable political space reflected in the scores they receive. Take, for instance, Hugo Chávez, Peronist leader Néstor Kirchner, and Evo Morales, who often have been judged to form the group of national-populist leaders or, to put it differently, taken as examples of the “bad” or “wrong” left (Castañeda 2004, 2006).<sup>7</sup> However, the mean expert placements of their positions on the general left-right scale differ substantively. While the Venezuelan president is judged to be the most left-leaning leader in the region, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, though clearly a leftist leader, is assumed to be more moderate with a score of 3.87. The former Argentinean president in turn receives a center-left rating of 8.35. Likewise the positions of the presidents of Ecuador and Nicaragua, who have also been generally perceived abroad as radicals during their countries’ election processes, differ substantially. While Rafael Correa is judged to be clearly on the left with a score of 4.2, the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, with a mean of 8.55, is actually ranked as being the most moderate representative of the left-wing leaders.

We see less pronounced but similar variation in the group of presidents usually assumed to represent the moderate left: Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, Brazil’s Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva, and Uruguay’s Tabaré Vázquez. The former Chilean president, who has frequently been described as a moderate social democratic politician, is assigned the most leftist position with an expert judgment score of 6.23, followed by Tabaré Vázquez with a mean placement of 6.64, and Lula with a center-left score of 8.15.

Thus, we find considerable dispersion among the so-called left-wing presidents even when split into clusters of moderates and radicals. Nevertheless, although there might exist a rather uniform view or idea of what political left represents, it is also true

that the political context shapes labels like “left” and “right” and their use. The general left-right dimension thus has “no fixed definition in terms of its substantive policy content” (Benoit and Laver 2006, 131), and it is likely that the relative contribution of specific policy areas to the meaning of this concept differs from country to country, thereby influencing the overall left-right position of an actor. Before we examine such country differences with exploratory regression analyses in detail, we take an intermediate step and use a two-dimensional representation of the general left-right axis to illustrate this concern.

### **From One to Two Dimensions**

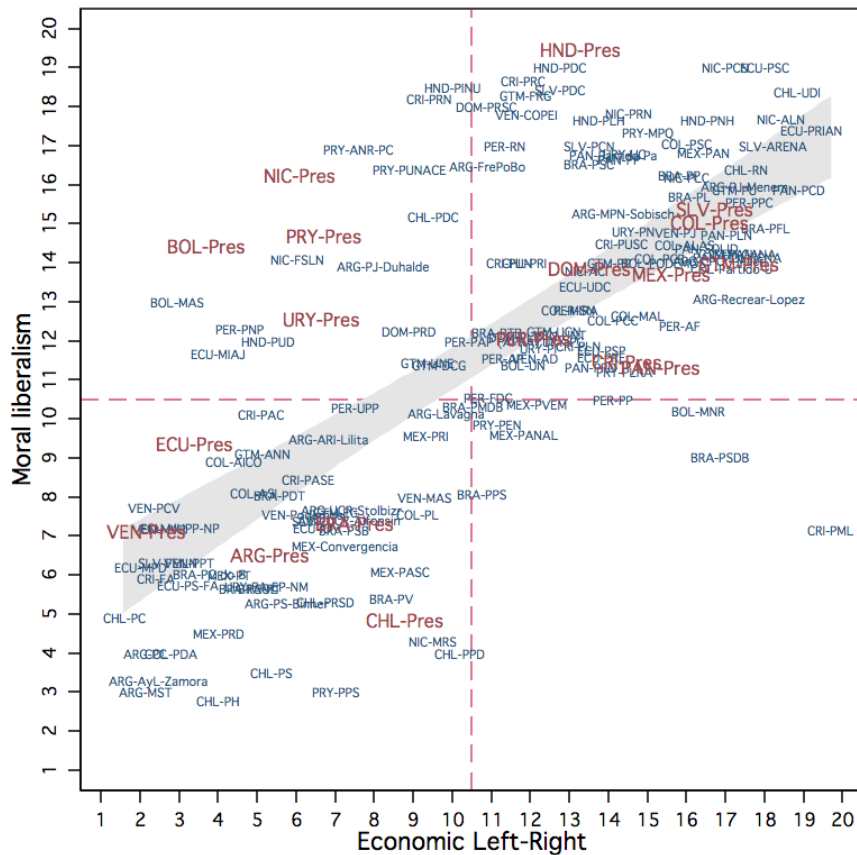
Probably the most common way to understand the conflict axis of left and right is as a description of the socioeconomic policy positions of political actors. From a comparative perspective, we can use the results from our expert survey and map experts’ scores of party positions in a two-dimensional space of more specific economic and social policy dimensions.

We use a simple scatterplot of political parties and presidents in Latin American countries. Figure 2 shows positioning on the deregulation/privatization dimension, indicating economic left-right, and on the social policy dimension, which can also be understood as moral liberalism, indicating positioning on issues such as divorce, gay rights, and abortion.<sup>8</sup> For ease of inspection, the figure also plots a fitted linear regression with a 95 percent confidence interval and large cross hairs intersecting at the midpoints, partitioning the scatterplot into quadrants.

First we notice that presidents and parties seem to lie along the fitted line indicating one underlying dimension. A closer look, moreover, shows that the scatterplot of economic vs. social policy positions reveals several interesting features of the political landscape in Latin America.

FIGURE 2

### SCATTERPLOT OF POLICY POSITIONING IN LATIN AMERICA IN A SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICY SPACE



Not surprisingly, the location of the vast majority of actors on the moral liberalism dimension reflects the high level of conservatism we find in the region. The overwhelming majority of parties and presidents appear to significantly oppose liberal policies on homosexuality, divorce, and abortion, issues that are still fiercely debated in some parts of Latin America. For instance, while the legalization of abortion, at least for therapeutic reason such as danger to the woman's life, is slowly gaining ground throughout the region, Chile, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic do not provide for exceptions and abortion remains illegal. Chile and Uruguay are good examples of the conflictive nature of these topics. In Chile in November 2006 a legislative initiative put

forward by two legislators, one of whom belonged to the presidential party *Partido Socialista* (Socialist Party, or PS), was rejected in the Chilean Congress also by large parts of legislators backing the presidential coalition, the *Concertación*. In Uruguay in November 2008 President Tabaré Vázquez vetoed a bill aimed at decriminalizing abortion, which had originally been introduced by the president's own coalition. In the aftermath of this event the president resigned from his own party.

Turning to the positioning of political actors on the economic left-right, Latin America appears to be relatively more equally distributed between both camps. If we look at presidential positioning only, however, the continent appears to be split into half: we find nine presidents to the “left” of the economic scale and nine to the “right.” While the latter nine are also found exclusively on the “right” of the moral liberalism dimension, the four presidents from Bolivia, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay, together with a few parties, are situated in the upper, left quadrant. This combination—left on economic issues but quite conservative on social issues—is rather idiosyncratic for Latin America, as in most other contexts this quadrant usually is empty. Conversely, in most democracies the classic “liberal” party would be in the lower right quadrant: left on moral liberalism, right on the economy. However, the data indicate that for Latin American countries this quadrant is virtually empty: mostly empty of parties and completely empty of presidents.

This simple two-dimensional representation shows the problems that arise when we try to categorize actors on a single left-right continuum. Typically attached to the opposing poles on such a scale will be combinations from aspects like government intervention, equality, liberal views on social and moral matters, and a general propensity towards tolerance of change on the left vs. laissez-faire economic policies, inequality, socially and morally conservative views, and a general tendency towards preserving the status quo on the right. If we collapse the socioeconomic interpretation of left-right into one combined scale (having in mind what is commonly understood as “left” and “right”), it is pretty straightforward to locate the quadrants on the diagonal onto this single dimension. With the off-diagonal quadrants, by contrast, this is not such an easy endeavor. Classical liberalism understood as a combination of support for progressive social policies and economic government intervention—our lower right

quadrant—“has no unambiguous place on a left-right socioeconomic scale” (Benoit and Laver 2006, 132). More important for our example is that the same applies to the upper left quadrant which combines the moralist approach to social issues of the conservative with support for government economic intervention.

Consider as an example Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez and former Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte. Both actors are judged rather similarly on the two dimensions represented by the scatterplot. They have almost identical positions on the combined deregulation/privatization dimension (scores of 6.6 and 6.7 respectively) and as well are very closely positioned to each other on the dimension representing issues concerning abortion, homosexuality, and divorce (12.6 and 14.7 respectively). Yet, as can be seen in the figure of presidential positioning on the general left-right dimension (see Figure 1), with a left-right mean of 6.6, Uruguay’s Vázquez is clearly considered a leftist whereas Paraguay’s Duarte is considered to be on the right with a left-right mean of 14.4. Such a difference might stem from country-specific contexts and country-specific interpretations, from what country experts have in mind in substantive terms when they locate parties on the general left-right, applying local left-right semantics.

Thus, not only does Latin America appear to lack classic liberal parties, but also it seems to contain an unusual breed of “anti-liberal” parties and presidents: right on social policy yet left on economics, possibly reflecting the fierce anti-Washington Consensus discourse common in the region. It might be the case that the location on the general left-right axis depends on the relative importance of such topics to the local meaning of left and right. To tackle this question, in the next section we will use the results of the expert survey to explore the relative contribution of different policy areas to the overall left-right dimension.

## **SUBSTANTIVE MEANING OF LEFT AND RIGHT**

In our survey experts were asked to give not only their judgments of the positions of presidents and parties on substantive policy dimensions but also to judge the positions of the same political actors on the general left-right scale. We can use this information to analyze the relationship of the substantive policy dimensions with the general left-right

scale and thus to analyze the possibility that the substantive content of this dimension varies depending on the specific country context.

As we have seen, the survey applied two different sets of core dimensions in every country—Benoit and Laver’s hard core of four substantive policy dimensions and four dimensions of special interest for policy competition in the Latin American context. In their exploratory analysis Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009) employ the data reduction method of factor analysis on these eight key issues and show that positioning on these issues explains nearly half (0.45, or 45 percent) of the variance on an underlying common dimension represented by the first factor.<sup>9</sup> Except for decentralization and economic cooperation, which emerge as principal components of a second orthogonal factor, all dimensions load strongly on this first factor. Using the factor scores for each president and party from the factor analysis and contrasting these scored positions with the independent left-right placements of the same actors, the authors conclude that “[t]he results provide strong, undeniable evidence that the first dimension may be interpreted as the left-right dimension of politics in Latin America” (Wiesehomeier and Benoit 2009, 1440).

The finding of an underlying left-right axis in Latin American politics is remarkable. However, the strategic meaning in terms of a primary axis of political competition is very different from the substantive meaning this general dimension might have in individual countries. To explore this question further we will therefore use the six policy dimensions identified by the authors—deregulation/privatization, globalization, environmental policy, social policy, religious principles, and taxes vs. spending—to examine and contrast the association of experts’ placements of presidents and parties on these substantive policy dimensions with experts’ placements of the same actors on the general left-right in each country context.

Table 1 shows the results from weighted OLS regressions for each of the 18 Latin American countries, where the dependent variable is the expert placement of the party or president on the general left-right scale and the independent variables are the placements of the same expert on the specific policy dimensions indicated in the headings. Cases, that is, a placement of a political actor by a country specialist, were weighted with the vote share won in the election closest to the time of the expert survey,

and each row reports standardized coefficients. In the spirit of our two-dimensional representation in the preceding section, the first row of each country panel shows estimates predicting positioning on the left-right scale from positioning of the same actors on the economic and social policy dimensions. All coefficients are positive in sign, meaning that social conservatism and a preference for deregulation and privatization respectively are attached to local definitions of the political right.<sup>10</sup>

In general, placements of parties and presidents on the general left-right scale can be predicted pretty well from their placements on both substantive policy dimensions. In Bolivia, for instance, about 66 percent of the variation in the country expert placements on the left-right can be explained by placements on these two dimensions, albeit it seems that what best explains this variation is effectively positioning on the deregulation dimension. Other countries where the combined deregulation/privatization dimension best predicts placements are Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru. In other cases, such as Brazil or Venezuela, both economic and social policy are needed to explain variation on the left-right axis. However, in these countries the deregulation/privatization dimension clearly dominates the left-right placements, whereas in Argentina and Chile experts' placements on both dimensions contribute to the general left-right positions in almost equal measure.

Remember our discussion of the policy positions of Tabaré Vázquez and Nicanor Duarte on economic left-right vs. moral liberalism as illustrated by the scatterplot in Figure 2. We have seen that despite being judged quite similarly on these individual scales, both presidents receive strikingly different mean expert judgments on the general left-right dimension depicted in Figure 1. A look at the regression estimates indicates why this may be the case: In Paraguay social policies have a greater—effectively exclusive—impact on predictions on the general left-right axis.<sup>11</sup> In Uruguay, in contrast, the impact of the deregulation/privatization dimension clearly prevails. However, whereas in the latter country placements of political actors on both dimensions explain a substantial part of the variation (81 percent) in their placements on the left-right scale, this is certainly not the case in Paraguay. Only 12 percent of the variation in the placements by Paraguayan country experts of parties and the president on the left-right



TABLE 1

WEIGHTED OLS REGRESSIONS PREDICTING LEFT-RIGHT POSITIONS								
Country	Deregulation	Social	Taxes	Religion	Environment	Globalization	Root MSE	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
ARG	0.512***	0.444***					2.364	0.751
ARG	0.373***	0.291***	0.184***	0.184***			2.186	0.785
ARG	0.151***	0.226***	0.038	0.120***	0.114***	0.429***	1.788	0.854
BOL	0.826***	0.069					3.383	0.659
BOL	0.801***	0.005	0.114	0.061			2.796	0.749
BOL	0.144	0.024	0.079	0.044	-0.013	0.741***	2.375	0.820
BRA	0.621***	0.288***					2.548	0.649
BRA	0.590***	0.287***	0.081	-0.048			2.300	0.718
BRA	0.425***	0.201***	0.007	-0.106***	0.222***	0.211***	2.127	0.746
CHL	0.498***	0.477***					2.539	0.776
CHL	0.307***	0.258***	0.223***	0.283***			2.198	0.832
CHL	0.264***	0.267***	0.195***	0.273***	0.028	0.101**	2.252	0.827
COL	0.712***	0.235***					2.803	0.655
COL	0.477***	-0.009	-0.018	0.517***			2.190	0.796
COL	0.271***	0.025	-0.015	0.303***	0.233***	0.243***	1.862	0.853
CRI	0.855***	-0.068					2.538	0.680
CRI	0.687***	-0.070	0.190**	0.197**			2.129	0.757
CRI	0.252**	-0.150	0.151**	0.131	0.473***	0.178	1.761	0.834
DOM	0.423**	0.412**					2.160	0.275
DOM	0.455**	0.266	-0.344	0.598**			1.949	0.410
DOM	0.449	0.260	-0.358	0.575**	0.122	-0.015	2.013	0.370
ECU	0.811***	0.220***					2.025	0.904
ECU	0.788***	0.139	0.129**	0.007			1.809	0.922
ECU	0.311	0.379***	0.226**	-0.127***	0.096	0.105	0.820	0.981
GTM	0.684***	0.030					3.302	0.467
GTM	0.610***	-0.145	0.114	0.341***			2.805	0.581
GTM	0.270	-0.258**	-0.168	0.518***	0.140	0.450	2.607	0.653
HND	0.806***	0.060					2.420	0.643
HND	0.911**	0.070	-0.086	-0.134			2.633	0.577
HND	0.311	0.048	0.000	-0.121	0.449***	0.475***	1.198	0.912
MEX	0.597***	0.363***					2.360	0.801
MEX	0.560***	0.334***	-0.097**	0.099			2.310	0.810
MEX	0.259***	0.312***	-0.090***	0.019	0.060	0.460***	1.711	0.894
NIC	0.765***	0.079					3.874	0.621
NIC	0.684***	0.014	0.314***	0.196			3.342	0.717
NIC	0.365***	0.028	0.159**	0.211**	0.091	0.410***	2.866	0.792
PAN	0.211	0.618***					2.728	0.532
PAN	0.170	0.665***	0.058	0.094			2.310	0.635
PAN	0.231	0.632***	0.016	0.112	0.087	-0.114	2.270	0.640

**Table 1 continued**

PER	0.810***	0.071					2.228	0.677
PER	0.728***	-0.001	0.024	0.168**			2.060	0.668
PER	0.447***	-0.012	0.038	0.216***	0.185**	0.197**	1.906	0.714
PRY	0.209	0.329***					3.481	0.125
PRY	0.390***	0.178	0.442***	0.521***			2.862	0.450
PRY	0.231	0.092	0.357***	0.426***	0.185	0.233	2.769	0.464
SLV	0.843***	0.151**					1.660	0.942
SLV	0.729***	0.104	0.054	0.148***			1.459	0.956
SLV	0.601***	0.085	0.011	0.129**	0.195**	0.031	1.370	0.962
URY	0.817***	0.150***					1.790	0.811
URY	0.663***	0.131**	0.229***	-0.015			1.695	0.831
URY	0.574***	0.015	0.151**	-0.012	0.181***	0.224**	1.308	0.897
VEN	0.774***	0.172***					2.229	0.747
VEN	0.667***	0.111**	0.137***	0.169***			2.027	0.791
VEN	0.435***	0.041	0.127***	0.167***	0.075	0.301***	1.895	0.813

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05

Each row reports standardized coefficients for weighted OLS regressions where the dependent variable is the expert placement of the party or president on the general left-right scale and the independent variables are the placements of the same expert on the specific policy dimensions indicated in the headings. Cases were weighted with the vote share won in the election closest to the time of the expert survey.

dimension can be explained by the placements of the same actors on the social and economic policy dimensions. It appears likely that in this case we are missing something that forms part, at least in the minds of the country specialists, of the substantial interpretation of left and right.

It may be that in a specific country like Paraguay we need something more to capture economic and social policy. One issue that springs to mind in the Latin American context is the dimension of religious principles in politics. Many scholars of Latin American politics will undoubtedly consider this issue to be a relevant dimension of competition, and as we have seen, Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009) indeed show that it also provides a strong component of positioning on the overall left-right dimension on a regional level. Although the religious principles in politics dimension and the social policy dimension understood as indicating positioning on matters on divorce, gay rights, and abortion most certainly will overlap, they capture quite different aspects of social policy. Similarly, the dimension of deregulation and privatization captures a quite different aspect of economic government intervention from the dimension measuring economic policy interpreted as the trade-off between lower taxes and higher public spending.

The second row of each country panel in Table 1 shows the results of adding these alternative manifestations of social and economic policy as independent variables. With the exception of Bolivia, Brazil, Honduras, and Panama, positioning on either or both of taxes vs. spending and religious principles contribute significantly to positioning on the overall left-right. Only in Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela are all four substantive policy dimensions needed to predict left-right placements, but including the two additional policy dimensions improves our ability to predict expert left-right placements considerably in all 18 Latin American countries. For instance, in Paraguay we see that now 45 percent of all the variation in the placements of parties and the president on the left-right dimension can be explained by these four dimensions.

Not only does the predictive power change notably but, furthermore, in most of the cases we see major shifts in the relative contributions of the regression coefficients. In almost all of the 18 countries we are investigating the impact of the deregulation/privatization dimension declines; however, it remains the best predictor of expert judgments on the general left-right in the vast majority of cases. In contrast, the taxes vs. spending dimension adds rather little to our ability to predict left-right positions but does so significantly in half of the countries in the region. The impact on the social policy dimension interpreted as moral liberalism is far more dramatic. In the Dominican Republic and Peru the religious dimension clearly captures an aspect not represented by the social policy dimension, whereas in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Paraguay the impact of the social policy dimension is replaced. Furthermore, in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay experts' judgments on religious principles in politics are now the main predictors of left-right placement of presidents and parties.

As a last step we will add two substantive dimensions that can be deemed somewhat different from the ones discussed so far. There has been much discussion about the changing nature of the meaning of left and right (see Benoit and Laver 2006, 2007). New dimensions of substantive policy may develop and change the salience of policy dimensions that contribute to the meaning of left and right. The most prominent example that comes into mind is the importance that environmental policies have gained in advanced democracies and also in some Latin American countries where political

actors like green parties have sprung to life. Thinking of the post–Washington Consensus era in Latin America, in a similar way we can consider the issue of globalization as an important policy dimension dividing the left and the right, much more so than would be the case in, for instance, Western European countries. Although it may be primarily associated with redistributive consequences in Latin America, the globalization dimension is likely to capture some quite different social and cultural aspects.

We can see the effects of adding policy positioning of parties and presidents on environmental policy and globalization to the weighted OLS regressions in the third and therefore last row of each country panel in Table 1. The results show that in Latin American countries concerns such as maintaining a clean and healthy environment now form a substantial component of expert judgments of placements on the left-right. Out of the eight countries where this is the case, in Costa Rica, Honduras, and to a lesser extent in Colombia and Brazil, environmental policy shows a considerable contribution. It comes as no surprise that in the case of Costa Rica positioning on this substantive policy dimension emerges as the best predictor of positioning on the overall left-right dimension.

Nevertheless, including these two additional policy dimensions most clearly affects the coefficients of the combined deregulation/privatization dimension. In all country regressions the impact of this policy dimension declines considerably—in the cases of Argentina, Mexico, and Nicaragua the coefficient is more or less cut in half. In 11 countries experts' judgments of positions on the globalization dimension are an important predictor of left-right judgments and in the majority of cases with a rather considerable impact. The country that certainly stands out in this respect is Bolivia. In this case adding positioning on taxes vs. spending and religious principles did not change the fact that deregulation was the best predictor. However, in the last row of the country panel we see a striking effect: now 82 percent of the variation that can be explained in the placements made by Bolivian country specialists of Bolivian parties and the president on the left-right dimension is entirely attributable to the globalization dimension.<sup>12</sup> A very similar pattern can be found in Honduras, although due to the low response rate in this case, the results should probably be taken with a grain of salt.

It is eye-catching that in the countries where the globalization dimension emerges as an important predictor of positioning on the general left-right, the vast majority are led by leftists. These results seem to underpin interpretations that see in the amelioration of socioeconomic inequalities often exacerbated by neoliberal policies a unifying theme throughout the left in Latin America (see discussion in Baker and Greene 2009; Cameron 2009; Stokes 2009). However, we also see that in Chile the contribution of this dimension is less substantial, which is attributable to the circumstance that since democratization the socioeconomic incorporation of previously excluded sectors did expand significantly (Luna and Filgueira 2009). It is therefore important to recognize such country-specific political contexts and to seek variations along these lines.

In general, then, the total of the six substantive policy dimensions examined here improve our ability to predict parties' and presidents' placements on the left-right dimension in each of the 18 countries under investigation. In more than two-thirds of the countries placements on these six dimensions explain a large part (75–98 percent) of the variation in placements of the same actors on the overall left-right. But we also see a huge variation in the substantive correlates of left-right across the Latin American region. In some countries left-right positions seem to be best reflected by a combination of a variety of dimensions. In others the impact of economic issues dominates, whereas in a country like Panama social policy is effectively the only substantive policy dimension that significantly predicts left-right expert judgments.

To return to our running example of Uruguay and Paraguay, we see that in Uruguay the religious dimension is not an independent significant component of expert judgments on the left-right axis at all, whereas economic policies clearly dominate. Yet, in Panama and Paraguay, two countries where social and religious issues contribute most to the meaning of left and right, the inclusion of environmental policy and globalization did not add much predictive power. It might be that in some countries even more specific issues are necessary to capture what country specialists had in mind in substantive terms when they placed parties and presidents on the overall left-right scale. For instance, adding the policy dimension of promotion of minority rights to the weighted OLS regression for Paraguay leads to a notable improvement of the variation we can explain on the left-right (from 46 percent to now 66 percent). The impact of the

religious dimension declines, while the independent impact of policy positions on the minority dimension emerges as the most important predictor. A very similar pattern can be seen in the case of Panama with the inclusion of the dimension measuring positioning on the security vs. individual liberties dimension. The coefficient of social policy declines dramatically and the security dimension is now the most important predictor.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the minority dimension contributes significantly to left-right in Brazil, as does—not surprisingly—the security question in El Salvador, where the issue of gang criminality constitutes a major concern. Researchers using the one-dimensional representation of left-right in comparative studies should keep in mind such differences when moving across countries.

### **EXPERTS VS. ALTERNATIVE LEFT-RIGHT ESTIMATES**

The preceding section explored the substantive policy content of the overall left-right dimension in each of the 18 Latin American countries using estimates derived by asking country specialists to judge positions of parties and presidents on a set of specific policy dimensions and a direct measure of positioning on the general left-right. Of course, there are other sources that can be used to estimate policy positions of political actors, and we can assess the validity of our expert estimates by comparing them against existing left-right measures generated by an alternative approach. At the end of the day, experts should not conceptualize left and right in such a different way as to cause their evaluations to diverge starkly from these other measurement instruments (see also Benoit and Laver 2007).

One alternative measurement for assessing positions of parties and presidents on the general left-right in Latin American countries comes from elite surveys of party politicians. I will use data from the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) project of the University of Salamanca concentrating on legislative years between 2002 and 2007, that is, the most recent wave available and closest to the time the expert survey was deployed. I focus on politicians' judgments made about other parties in congress rather than their own positions and thus use them in a sense as experts to evaluate positions of parties and—where possible—presidents (see also Steenbergen and Marks 2007). Although the survey did not explicitly include the figure of the president, the

Salamanca questionnaire asked representatives to rank some political leaders, which in two-thirds of the countries did include the head of state.<sup>14</sup>

Using the data in this way has several advantages. Frequently elite surveys suffer from the problem that the sample sizes for minor parties in parliament are necessarily small—often too small to be used for statistical inference. Very often marginal parties that do not have a large representation in congress, or are not present in congress at all, but are nonetheless important for the overall political landscape in a given country (and thus for the meaning of left and right) are not even included in the studies. Also researchers may have to struggle with low participation rates. However, the evaluation of other parties usually does include more parties than typically participate in surveys of this kind. Hence, we are able to make direct comparisons between the left-right scores for 74 parties and 12 presidents for which both elite survey and expert survey estimates exist.<sup>15</sup>

We start with a comparison of party positions in the pooled cross-national sample. Figure 3 shows the association between the left-right scores from both surveys with a simple scatterplot and also plots a fitted linear regression with a 95-percent confidence interval. For the ease of inspection, large cross hairs partition the plot into four quadrants, intersecting at the mid-point of each scale, and country-party abbreviations are used to identify each point. The first impression from this graphical representation is more than reassuring: we find very little noise and the two scales indeed seem to measure the same thing, with the expert survey estimates of left-right positions explaining 82 percent of the variance in the PELA data.<sup>16</sup> There is an almost perfect linear fit between the two measures and a perfect intersection of the regression line through the midpoints (10.5, 5.5) of the two scales.

However, though it involves only a few cases, we nevertheless find some disagreement in the location of some actors. What certainly can be characterized as the biggest divergences are cases where both surveys come to completely opposing assessments and disagree on whether a president or a party is placed on the left or the right of the political landscape. Table 2 identifies all cases classified by this definition and lists the outliers we find in the off-diagonal quadrants along with the survey scores, the standardized residual, and the year the PELA survey was conducted.

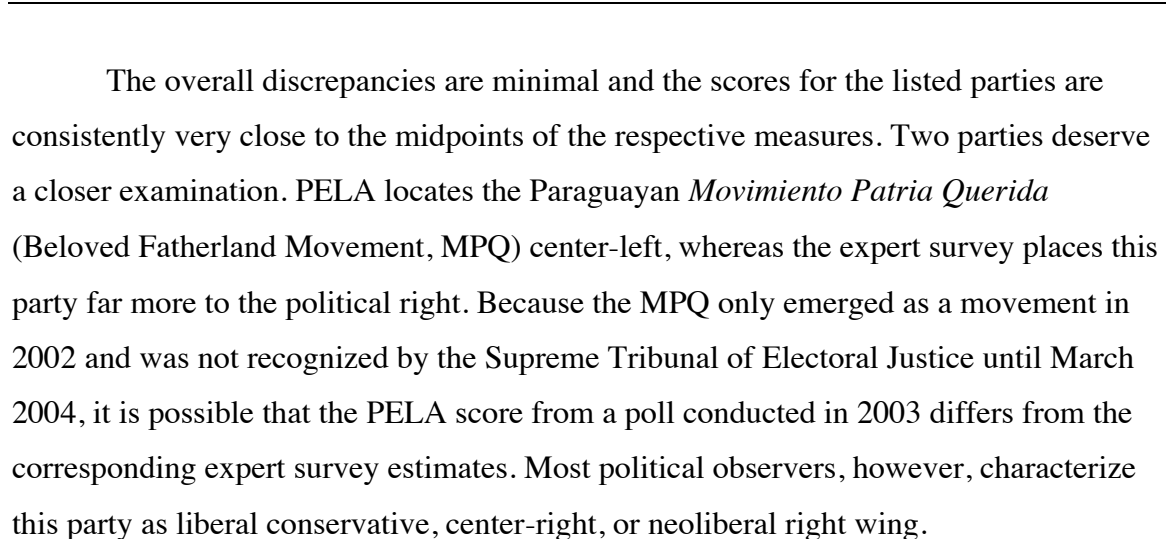




TABLE 2

**DIVERGENCES BETWEEN EXPERT SURVEY AND PELA SCORES FOR  
LEFT-RIGHT POSITIONS**

Country	Party	Left-Right Score			
		Expert survey	PELA	Standardized residual	PELA year
<i>Expert survey says right, PELA says left</i>					
Panama	President Torrijos	11.33	5.42	−0.44	2002
Dominican Republic	PLD	11.71	5.28	−0.76	2002
Ecuador	PSP	12.20	5.42	−0.83	2003
Panama	PRD	10.63	4.64	−0.96	2002
Costa Rica	PRC	13.88	5.45	−1.54	2002
Paraguay	MPQ	15.40	5.26	−2.42	2003
<i>Expert survey says left, PELA says right</i>					
Dominican Republic	PRD	9.00	7.05	2.34	2002
Honduras	PINU	8.67	5.74	1.09	2002
Honduras	PDC	10.00	5.93	0.69	2002

We observe a disagreement in the opposite direction for the *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano* (Dominican Revolutionary Party, PRD), which is placed on the left by our experts but on the right by parliamentary respondents. Historically, this party always had the sympathy of social institutions such as unions or students that defended a moderate left-wing, social-democratic position. Taking into account politicians' perception of their own party collected by the Salamanca team, we can see that the PRD seemingly oscillates in the political center, with associated left-right means (year of survey) of 5.1 (1996), 4.87 (2000), and 6.38 (2002) on a 10-point scale. In other words, if we take a slightly different perspective, both measures agree to a large extent upon the centrist character of the political actors listed in the above table.

Another way to evaluate the expert survey results is to focus on the comparison of the left-right scales within each country. Table 3 uses ordinal information and compares the ordering of political actors from left to right in each country using the scores from the expert surveys and the PELA elite surveys along with two measures of ordinal association. Whereas Kendall's tau-a measures the likelihood of agreement of

the orderings vs. the likelihood of disagreement and ranges from  $-1.0$  to  $1.0$ , Spearman's rho is an ordinal measure of correlation.

TABLE 3

WITHIN-COUNTRY COMPARISONS OF EXPERT SURVEY AND PELA RANKINGS					
Country	N	Party ordering from left to right		Kendall's tau a	Spearman's rho
		Expert survey	PELA		
CHL	6	PC PH PS Pres PPD PRSD PDC PRI RN UDI	PS PPD PRSD PDC RN	1	1
COL	3	PDA ASI AICO PL MIRA MAL PCC PCR PSC ALAS Partido-U Pres	PDA PCC Pres	1	1
HND	5	PUD PINU PDC PLH Pres PNH	PUD PINU PDC PLH PNH	1	1
MEX	7	PRD PT PASC Convergencia PRI PANAL PVEM Pres PAN	PRD PT Convergencia PRI PVEM Pres PAN	1	1
VEN	5	PCV Pres MVR PPT Podemos MAS AD UNT COPEI PJ	Pres MVR MAS AD COPEI	1	1
BRA	6	PSOL PCdoB PT PV PSB Pres PDT PPS PMDB PSDB PTB PL PSC PP PFL	PT PMDB PTB <b>PFL PP</b>	0.87	0.94
ECU	6	MPD MIAJ PS-FA MUPP-NP Pres ID PRE UDC PSP PRIAN PSC	MUPP-NP ID <b>PSP PRE</b> PRIAN PSC	0.87	0.94
NIC	5	FSLN MRS Pres AC PRN ALN PCN PLC	<b>Pres FSLN</b> PRN PCN PLC	0.8	0.9
SLV	5	FMLN CD PDC Pres PCN ARENA	FMLN PDC <b>PCN Pres</b> ARENA	0.8	0.9
CRI	6	FA PAC PASE PLN PRN PUN Pres PRC PUSC PML	PAC <b>PRC</b> PLN Pres PUSC PML	0.73	0.83
PRY	6	PPS PEN PLRA Pres MPQ ANR-PC PUNACE	PPS <b>MPQ</b> PLRA Pres ANR-PC PUNACE	0.73	0.83
PAN	7	PRD Pres PP SOLID PLN MOLIRENA Partido-Pa PCD	PRD Pres PP <b>Partido-Pa</b> SOLID PLN MOLIRENA	0.71	0.76
URY	5	FA-EP-NM Pres PI PN PC UC	FA-EP-NM Pres UC PN PC	0.6	0.7
BOL	3	MAS Pres UN PODEMOS MNR	<b>Pres MAS</b> MNR	0.33	0.5
PER	3	PNP UPP FDC PAP(APRA) AP Pres RN PP SN AF PPC	<b>PAP(APRA) UPP PP</b>	0.33	0.5
GTM	4	ANN EG UNE DCG UCN PAN PU FRG Pres GANA PP	DCG <b>Pres</b> PAN FRG	0.33	0.4

Note: Parties in *italic* are parties that were only included in the expert survey. Parties in **bold** are cases where the ranking differs. Pres stands for President. N indicates the number of parties for which both expert survey and PELA estimates exist.

In general the agreement is quite high. In 5 of the 18 Latin American countries both sources of positions on the general left-right dimension agree perfectly on the ranking. In the case of Brazil for instance, where only the order of the PFL and the PP are swapped, Kendall's tau-a indicates that both ranks are 87 percent more likely to agree than to disagree. In sum, we can confidently conclude that the cross-validation between left-right scores from our expert survey and those gathered by an alternative approach, namely elite surveys, is reassuring.

## CONCLUSION

Using policy positions of political parties and presidents derived from a recent expert survey, this paper has explored the substantive meaning of left and right in Latin American countries. First, a comparison of expert judgments of presidential positioning on the general left-right dimension confirmed rather considerable spaces among actors usually lumped together in distinct groups of the left. Second, a two-dimensional description of the general left-right further illustrated difficulties we may face when we try to locate actors on the one-dimensional axis of left-right. Third, building on work of Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009), the exploratory analysis reveals interesting facets of the substantive meanings of left and right in each country. Economic policy interpreted as a trade-off between lower taxes and higher public spending typically adds little to our ability to predict left-right placements, and the social policy dimension gives rather mixed results. On the other hand, the combined deregulation/privatization dimension emerges as a major predictor of positioning on the left and right, together with the globalization dimension, which more than emphasizing interventionist government economic policy focuses on consequences of globalization. Interestingly, in a number of countries environmental policy is a significant component of the substantive meaning of left and right, and the influence of religion as a distinguishing factor is also confirmed. Finally, a direct comparison of the left-right expert placements with placements on the same scale derived from elite surveys shows a striking overlap between both measures, which validates the usefulness of our data.

These findings directly address the most recent debates in the comparative study of Latin American politics that evolve around the so-called left turn. By and large the regression results show considerable consistency across countries concerning the *direction* of the associations between experts' placements of parties and presidents on substantive policy dimensions and experts' placements of the same actors on the overall left-right. However, the results also confirm that the *contributions* to the general left-right of the individual dimensions examined by this analysis vary when we move from country to country. Countries are far from forming uniform clusters—either across the region or across different subgroups of the left.

Differences among countries in the substantive meaning of left and right and the associated concern about lack of comparability come as no surprise to students of other regions (Benoit and Laver 2006). So far, however, such differences had not been demonstrated in the case of Latin American democracies. In light of ongoing research aimed at either typology building of the left or cross-country comparisons that involve the evaluation of policy positions on the general left-right, scholars should be mindful of the contexts they study and the implications for their explanations (Falleti and Lynch 2009). This is not to say that cross-country studies of Latin America are impossible. For instance, the claim that, rather than voters' aversion to markets themselves, social consequences resulting from neoliberal policies can explain the rise of the left could be examined directly by using well-defined policy dimensions. Scholarly recognition of the importance to the substantive meaning of left and right in the region of such policy dimensions, which reflect local peculiarities of development and do not necessarily form part of our preconceived definitions of “left” and “right,” will hopefully lead to more in-depth studies of country-specific conditions.

## APPENDIX

Questionnaire					Respondents		
Country	Language	Format	Total Parties	Total Dimensions	Total Respondents	Total Surveyed	Response Rate (%)
Argentina	Spanish	Web	14	11	38	114	33%
Bolivia	Spanish	Web	4	12	16	59	27%
Brazil	Portuguese	Web	14	11	41	135	30%
Chile	Spanish	Web	9	12	24	56	43%
Columbia	Spanish	Web	11	12	16	59	27%
Costa Rica	Spanish	Web	9	12	16	43	37%
Dominican Republic	Spanish	Web	3	10	9	31	29%
Ecuador	Spanish	Web	10	12	8	54	15%
El Salvador	Spanish	Web	5	11	13	31	42%
Guatemala	Spanish	Web	10	12	11	36	31%
Honduras	Spanish	Web	5	12	4	20	20%
Mexico	Spanish	Web	8	12	25	74	34%
Nicaragua	Spanish	Web	7	12	11	41	27%
Panama	Spanish	Web	7	12	9	28	32%
Paraguay	Spanish	Web	6	10	10	29	34%
Peru	Spanish	Web	10	11	13	46	28%
Uruguay	Spanish	Web	5	9	18	33	55%
Venezuela	Spanish	Web	9	12	23	77	30%
<b>Totals</b>			<b>146 different parties</b>		<b>305 total valid responses</b>	<b>966 experts surveyed</b>	<b>Mean response rate 32%</b>

**Note:** Plus eighteen presidents in office at the time the surveys were deployed.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The data are available on the author's homepage, [www.wiesehomeier.net](http://www.wiesehomeier.net).

<sup>2</sup> A thorough discussion of the advantages of expert surveys lies beyond the scope of this paper. For an overview see Benoit and Wiesehomeier (2009). For more details on the survey see the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> In general, Wiesehomeier and Benoit's basic methodology closely matches, and actually can be viewed as an extension of, the expert surveys presented in Benoit and Laver (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The questionnaires were translated into the native language of the country under investigation. Each substantive policy scale was given a precise title and the scale endpoints were given a precise substantive definition. The exact text wording was as follows. Economic: "Promotes raising taxes to increase public services (1). Promotes cutting public services to cut taxes (20)." Social: "Favors (1)/Opposes (20) liberal policies on matters such as abortion, homosexuality, [in-vitro fertilization], divorce, and euthanasia." Decentralization: "Promotes (1)/Opposes (20) decentralization of all administration and decision-making." Environment: "Supports protection of the environment, even at the cost of economic growth (1). Supports economic growth, even at the cost of damage to the environment (20)." In the case of social policy, the Benoit-Laver wording was adapted to the Latin American context by adding the topic of divorce which was originally not included. In-vitro fertilization was added in the case of Costa Rica.

<sup>5</sup> For the Latin American core dimensions the wording was as follows: Religion: "Supports secular (1)/religious (20) principles in politics." Globalization: "Opposed to (1)/Favorable towards (20) all consequences of globalization." Regional Economic Cooperation: "Favors (1)/Rejects (20) closer ties to regional organizations or treaties of economic cooperation that may impose binding regulations on \_\_\_\_\_ trade." Deregulation: "Favors high levels of state regulation and control of the market (1)." "Favors deregulation of markets at every opportunity

(20).” Privatization: “Promotes maximum (1)/Opposes all (20) state ownership of business and industry, such as gas, oil, electricity, and telecommunications.” The latter two dimensions were applied in a mutually exclusive fashion, meaning that when one was included, the other was omitted from the questionnaire. In the following, these dimensions are treated as equivalent and combined.

<sup>6</sup> Presumably, with the election of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay and Mauricio Funes in El Salvador the division would be reversed, rendering the *Guardian*’s claim that “left-of-center governments...now outnumber right-of-centre administrations” (12/4/2006) now more appropriate. Even so, the regional mean would not be affected too heavily.

<sup>7</sup> During Kirchner’s time in office this assessment changed and he was ascribed to the group of moderate left presidents. Furthermore it should be acknowledged that this is not the only clustering we could consider here. Especially at the beginning Lula’s ascendancy was closely observed to see how this “populist” would affect the Brazilian economy.

<sup>8</sup> Wiesehomeier and Benoit (2009) show that the dimension of deregulation/privatization is by far more important in Latin American countries than the more traditional taxes vs. spending dimension of economic policy.

<sup>9</sup> Together with a second factor, 60 percent of the variance in the underlying policy dimensions is explained.

<sup>10</sup> The only exception is the—statistically insignificant—social policy coefficient in Costa Rica.

<sup>11</sup> The only other country where this is the case is Panama.

<sup>12</sup> From results not reported here we know that this pattern does not change even when additional policy dimensions such as the minority question are added.

<sup>13</sup> Due to space limitations these results are not displayed here, but they are available upon request.

<sup>14</sup> The exact question used for the placement of political parties is “Cuando se habla de política se utilizan normalmente las expresiones izquierda y derecha. En una escala donde el 1 es la izquierda y el 10 la derecha, ¿en qué casilla colocaría Ud. a los siguientes partidos o coaliciones?” and for presidents, if available, the direct follow-up question is “Y, en esta misma escala, ¿dónde situaría Ud. a los siguientes líderes políticos?”

<sup>15</sup> Since in the Argentine case we explicitly asked for faction, this country is excluded from the validation test. The number of respondents in the PELA surveys ranges from N=31 to N=121 per country-party item.

<sup>16</sup> The OLS regression yielded the following results: N=86,  $R^2=0.82$ , Root MSE=0.94, Expert Survey Coefficient (SE) 0.416 (0.18), Constant 1.11 (0.26).



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